

American History: The Election of 1988



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Vice President George Bush, right, and his running mate, Indiana Senator Dan Quayle, at the Republican National Convention in 1988

STEVE EMBER: Welcome to THE MAKING OF A NATION – American history in VOA Special English. I'm Steve Ember.

This week in our series, we look at the presidential election of nineteen eighty-eight.

(MUSIC)

Ronald Reagan was finishing his second term. He was America's fortieth president and one of the most popular. During his eight years in office, many Americans did well financially. Many felt more secure about the future of the nation and the world. The possibility of nuclear war with the Soviet Union did not seem as great a threat as it had in the past.

The Constitution limits presidents to two terms. So, in nineteen eighty-eight, the country prepared to elect a new chief executive.

There were three main candidates for the Republican Party nomination. They were George Herbert Walker Bush, Bob Dole and Pat Robertson. Bush had just served eight years as Reagan's vice president. Dole was the top Republican in the

Senate. Robertson was a conservative Christian who had his own television program.

Ronald Reagan's popularity helped George Bush gain the Republican nomination. Neither Dole nor Robertson won enough votes in the primary election season to be a threat. Bush was nominated on the first vote at the party convention. The delegates accepted his choice

Eight candidates competed for the nomination of the Democratic Party. One of the candidates was Jesse Jackson, a black minister and political activist. He won about twenty-five percent of the delegates. He had also sought the nomination four years earlier.

The Democrats chose Michael Dukakis, the governor of Massachusetts. His running mate was Senator Lloyd Bentsen of Texas.



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George Bush and Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis at their final debate in the campaign

In public opinion surveys Dukakis looked like a strong candidate after the party conventions. But then he began to lose popularity. Many observers said he had waited too long to launch a nationwide campaign.

The candidates heavily attacked each other through campaign advertising on television.

Dukakis also came under attack from the Bush campaign, targeting his record as a governor. Campaign ads said Dukakis had not been tough enough with criminals.

ANNOUNCER: "Bush and Dukakis on Crime. Bush supports the death penalty for first degree murderers. Dukakis not only opposes the death penalty – he allowed first degree murderers to have weekend passes from prison. One was Willy Horton, who murdered a boy in a robbery, stabbing him nineteen times. Despite a life sentence, Horton received ten weekend passes from prison. Horton fled, kidnapped a young couple, stabbing the man and repeatedly raping his girlfriend. Weekend prison passes – Dukakis on crime."

Ads by the Bush campaign also said Dukakis would weaken America's military power. And they accused him of not protecting the environment by seeking a permit to dump sewage from Massachusetts off the coast of New Jersey.

ANNOUNCER: "The Environmental Protection Agency called Boston Harbor one of the dirtiest harbors in America. But not long ago, Governor Dukakis proposed a way to help clean it up – by dumping Massachusetts sewage sludge off the New Jersey shore, just one hundred and six miles from New York. Now, Michael Dukakis says he wants to do for America, what he's done for Massachusetts. New Jersey can't afford to take that risk."

MICHAEL DUKAKIS: "I'm fed up with it -- never seen anything like it in twenty-five years of public life."

Dukakis fought back.

MICHAEL DUKAKIS: "George Bush's negative TV ads distorting my record -- full of lies, and he knows it."

Dukakis accused Bush of not telling the truth about his part in the secret sales of arms to Iran to finance contra rebels in Nicaragua. He also criticized Bush for being part of an administration that reduced social programs.

DUKAKIS: "I must have been living through a different eight years from the ones the vice president's been living through, because this administration has cut and slashed, and cut and slashed programs for children, for nutrition, for the kinds of things that can help these youngsters to live better lives.

"It's cut federal aid to education, has cut Pell Grants and loans, to close the door to college opportunity on youngsters all over this country. And that, too, is a major difference between the vice president and me."

(MUSIC)

In the end, Bush's campaign succeeded in making Dukakis look weak on crime and defense. Dukakis did not help himself with a commercial in which he was looking out of a moving tank while wearing a large helmet. Many people made fun of the ad.

On Election Day in November, Bush defeated Dukakis by almost seven million votes.

George Bush was sworn into office on January twentieth, nineteen eighty-nine.

GEORGE BUSH: "No president, no government can teach us to remember what is best in what we are. But if the man you have chosen to lead this government can help make a difference, if he can celebrate the quieter, deeper successes that are made -- not of gold and silk, but of better hearts and finer souls -- if he can do

these things, then he must. We as a people have such a purpose today. It is to make kinder the face of the nation and gentler the face of the world. My friends, we have work to do."

(MUSIC)

George Bush was the son of a United States senator and had led a life of public service. He joined the Navy when America entered World War Two. He flew attack planes. He was just eighteen years old -- at that time, the youngest pilot the Navy ever had. He flew many bombing raids against the Japanese in the Pacific. He was shot down once and rescued by an American submarine.

George Bush came home from the war as a hero. He became a university student and got married. He and his wife, Barbara, then moved to Texas where he worked in the oil business. He ran for the United States Senate in nineteen sixty-four, and lost. Two years later, he was elected to the House of Representatives.

He ran for the Senate again in nineteen seventy, and lost again. But by that time, he had gained wider recognition. Over the next eight years, he was appointed to a series of government positions. He was ambassador to the United Nations. He was chairman of the Republican National Committee. He was America's representative in China before the two countries had diplomatic relations. And he was head of the Central Intelligence Agency.

In nineteen eighty, Bush ran against Ronald Reagan for the Republican nomination for president. Bush lost but became Reagan's running mate.

After two terms as vice president, he felt ready to lead the nation himself.

The new president took seven foreign trips during his first year in office. In Europe, Bush met with the other leaders of NATO, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. He proposed a major agreement on reducing troops and non-nuclear weapons in Europe. The Soviet Union considered his proposal an important step in the right direction.

(MUSIC)

In June of nineteen eighty-nine, the Chinese government sent tanks and troops to crush pro-democracy protests in Tiananmen Square in Beijing. Hundreds and perhaps thousands of demonstrators were killed. President Bush took some steps against China, but many critics felt the sanctions were not strong enough.

In central and eastern Europe, communist governments also faced protests. Since nineteen eighty-seven, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev had let countries in the Warsaw Pact experiment with political and economic reforms.

But those reforms were not enough to stop the fall of communist governments in one country after another.

In the summer of nineteen eighty-nine, President Bush visited Hungary and Poland. Both nations were trying to develop free-market economies. Both were suffering as they moved away from central control.

(SOUND: Polish Solidarity demonstrators singing)

In Poland the leader of the Solidary trade union, Lech Walesa, led the push for reform.

(SOUND: Lech Walesa)

He would later become president of a democratic Poland.

(SOUND: West German Tagesschau television)

November of nineteen eighty-nine brought a dramatic expression of the changes taking place in eastern Europe.

On November ninth, East Germany opened the wall that had divided it from the West since nineteen sixty-one.

ANNOUNCER: "From ABC, this is World News Tonight with Peter Jennings, reporting tonight from Berlin."

PETER JENNINGS: "From the Berlin Wall specifically. Take a look at them. They've been there since last night. They are here in the thousands; they are here in the tens of thousands. Occasionally they shout 'Die Mauer muss weg!' – the wall must go!

"Thousands and thousands of West Germans come to make the point that the wall has suddenly become irrelevant. Something, as you can see, almost to party on. How do you measure such an astonishing moment in history?

"The East German government said tonight they were going to make more openings in the wall, at least a dozen more, put bulldozers right through the wall, so that more people could cross to the West. The East German communist

leadership tonight said there'd be a new election law guaranteeing secret elections which the rest of the world could monitor.

"And only twenty-four hours after East Germans were told they could go anywhere, anytime, the Soviet Union said – that was a sensible move!"

Within days, citizens and soldiers began tearing the wall down as the world watched with hope for a new era of peace.

(MUSIC: "Freiheit," Freedom)

PETER JENNINGS: "What's it feel like to be standing on top of the Wall?"

YOUNG GERMAN MEN: "Incredible. For me, it's -- I can't describe really my feelings. It's something unreal for me." "If there is someone who sleeps for eight weeks, and you told him what happened here, he thinks you are crazy. It's unthinkable."

(MUSIC)

The fall of the Berlin Wall pointed to the end of the Soviet Union, the end of Communist rule in most of the countries in the former Soviet Bloc – and the end of more than 40 years of the Cold War between the East and West.

The presidency of George Herbert Walker Bush will be remembered as the time during which these world changing events took place, as well as the beginning of the Persian Gulf War with Iraq, following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. We'll look at those and other events in the Bush presidency, both at home and abroad, next week.

You can find our series online with transcripts, MP3s, podcasts and pictures at voaspecialenglish.com. You can also follow us on Facebook and Twitter at VOA Learning English. I'm Steve Ember, inviting you to join us again next week for THE MAKING OF A NATION -- American history in VOA Special English.

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